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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2388

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000764

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CODEL RAHALL MEETING WITH

PRESIDENT-DESIGNATE SLEIMAN

REF: BEIRUT 760

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a May 25 meeting with CODEL Rahall a few hours before the Parliamentary vote on the Presidency, Lebanese President-Designate Sleiman said that Lebanon's problems can only be solved through dialogue. Sleiman thanked the delegation for their steadfast support of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and asked them for continued, and hopefully increased, support of the LAF so that it can control "all of the Lebanese territory." Sleiman warned the delegation that Lebanon could not be excluded from the peace process lest a new set of problems emerge with the 400,000 Palestinian refugees that reside in Lebanon. Sleiman recalled the tenure of former President Lahoud and told the Members that his leadership style was different and that he wanted to maintain open dialogue with the Prime Minister. Urged by some CODEL members to support the continuation of current Prime Minister Siniora, Sleiman told Members that decision was up to the Parliament, but that he supported Siniora staying as Prime Minister. In closing, Sleiman told the Members that he did not regret leaving behind his Army career, saying that after 41 years in uniform, "it is time for someone else to do this job." End Summary.

¶2. (C) Congressional Delegation Rahall, accompanied by Charge, DCM, and Defense Attaché, met with LAF Commander and President-Designate Michel Sleiman at Army Headquarters in Yarze at mid-day on May 25, some six hours before he was elected and sworn in as Lebanon's president. Sleiman received the delegation in a large meeting hall, not in his office, wearing civilian attire.

¶3. (C) Congressional Delegation Rahal consisted of three members of Congress Lebanese descent: Nick Rahall (D-WV), Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Ray Lahood (R-IL) as well as Charlie Melancon (D-LA), John Linder (R-GA), and Jack Kingston (R-GA).

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT
WE NEED MORE SUPPORT FOR THE ARMY

¶4. (C) Sleiman told the CODEL "We thank you for your support

of Lebanon, and for your support of the LAF in many ways." Sleiman told the delegation that there have been many delegations from the USG that have visited him during his years as LAF commander and all have been very welcome. Sleiman told the Members that he hopes to see an increase in support for the LAF in the future.

¶15. (C) Congressman Rahall told Sleiman that the LAF enjoys broad, bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress, saying, "we hope we can do more to support you." Rahall also encouraged Sleiman to work with his Parliament to resolve Lebanon's problems. Congressman Rahall explicitly cited the Doha agreement, noting, "we look for this agreement to be fully implemented." Characterizing the Doha Agreement as a step in the right direction, Rahall told Sleiman that Lebanon was in good hands and should be able to achieve all the elements outlined in the Doha Agreement.

DIALOGUE IS THE ONLY SOLUTION
MILITARY SOLUTIONS WON'T WORK

¶16. (C) Sleiman told the delegation that dialogue was the only way to address the problems of Lebanon as all of the problems are inherently political. Sleiman affirmed Rahall's declaration that political will was more important than military will saying, "No way the military solution works. Maybe for a short time, but not for long term solutions."

¶17. (C) Congressman Linder asked how Doha could be fully implemented to include the disarmament of Hizballah. Sleiman

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responding saying, "we must have dialogue on Sheba'a farms, prisoners, and other matters to resolve this problem."

DO NOT FORGET LEBANON IN THE PEACE PROCESS
WE HAVE 400,000 PALESTINIANS HERE TO CONSIDER

¶18. (C) "We need the Peace Process to succeed. I ask you to keep Lebanon in mind in this process," said Sleiman. Sleiman noted that there are over 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon in poor conditions, and he estimated that this population may increase to 500,000 in the next ten years. "These people are human beings who have a national case. For this reason, they will always hold on to their weapons," said Sleiman.

¶19. (C) "I'm not asking you to just throw them anywhere in the world," continued Sleiman, "but we need to find them a solution." Sleiman predicted that there would be an entirely new set of problems associated with the Palestinians in Lebanon if they are not included in the broader Peace Process. "They were the original 'resistance' against Israel before 1975," said Sleiman.

I WANT MY PRESIDENCY
TO BE DIFFERENT THAN EMILE LAHOUD'S;
SINIORA IS MY PREFERENCE FOR PRIME MINISTER

¶110. (C) Congressman Lahood informed Sleiman that he had been present at former President Emile Lahoud's inauguration. "We had high hopes, but they were dashed quickly," said Lahood. Lahood stressed what he saw as the importance of maintaining strong leadership throughout the Lebanese government. Speaking for himself, Lahood said, "We don't tell you who to pick, but I hope part of the next team is Prime Minister Siniora."

¶111. (C) Sleiman said that circumstances were very different under the tenure of Emile Lahoud. "I hope my future circumstances will be better," said Sleiman. Striking a tone of conciliation, Sleiman told us that his leadership style is very different from Lahoud and that he will be able to listen

to all sides with open dialogue. Sleiman told the members that he respects and appreciates all of the hard work that Siniora has done for Lebanon during his time as Prime Minister. Even though the decision regarding the election of the Prime Minister resides with the deputies, and not him, Sleiman told us he preferred Siniora "if I have the votes to nominate him." (Note: The process of nominating the PM includes consultations with the MPs that we understand will begin on Tuesday 27 May. See reftel for more information on this process. End Note.)

WE NEED A STRONG ARMY COMMANDER
I WILL STAY OUT OF THE AFFAIRS OF THE ARMY

¶12. (C) Congressman Issa told Sleiman that he witnessed a breakdown of dialogue between the Prime Minister and the President during Lahoud's tenure as President. Issa said that this lack of dialogue makes it more difficult to provide support when people are not talking. Issa stressed the need for a strong new LAF Commander to emerge from the ranks of the LAF in order to protect Lebanon and all of the Lebanese people. "We will give you the tools you need. You need to give us a good commander," said Issa.

¶13. (C) Issa explained that it was much easier for the Congress to support the Lebanon on UNSCR 1701, Sheba'a Farms and UNIFIL when the lines of communication were open between the President and the Prime Minister.

¶14. (C) Sleiman told the Members, "my style is different than Lahoud. I will not serve as a military man. I was in the Army for 41 years. Quite possibly, I am the longest serving officer ever in the Army. It is time for someone else to do this job." Acknowledging the need for continued dialogue among all parties, Sleiman said he hoped to help find solutions to Lebanon's many challenges.

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COMMENT

¶15. (C) Sleiman was very much at ease, seeming relieved that the long process of getting him into the Presidential Palace at Baabda was finally coming to an end. End comment.

¶16. (U) CODEL Rahall departed Beirut before this message was sent.

SISON